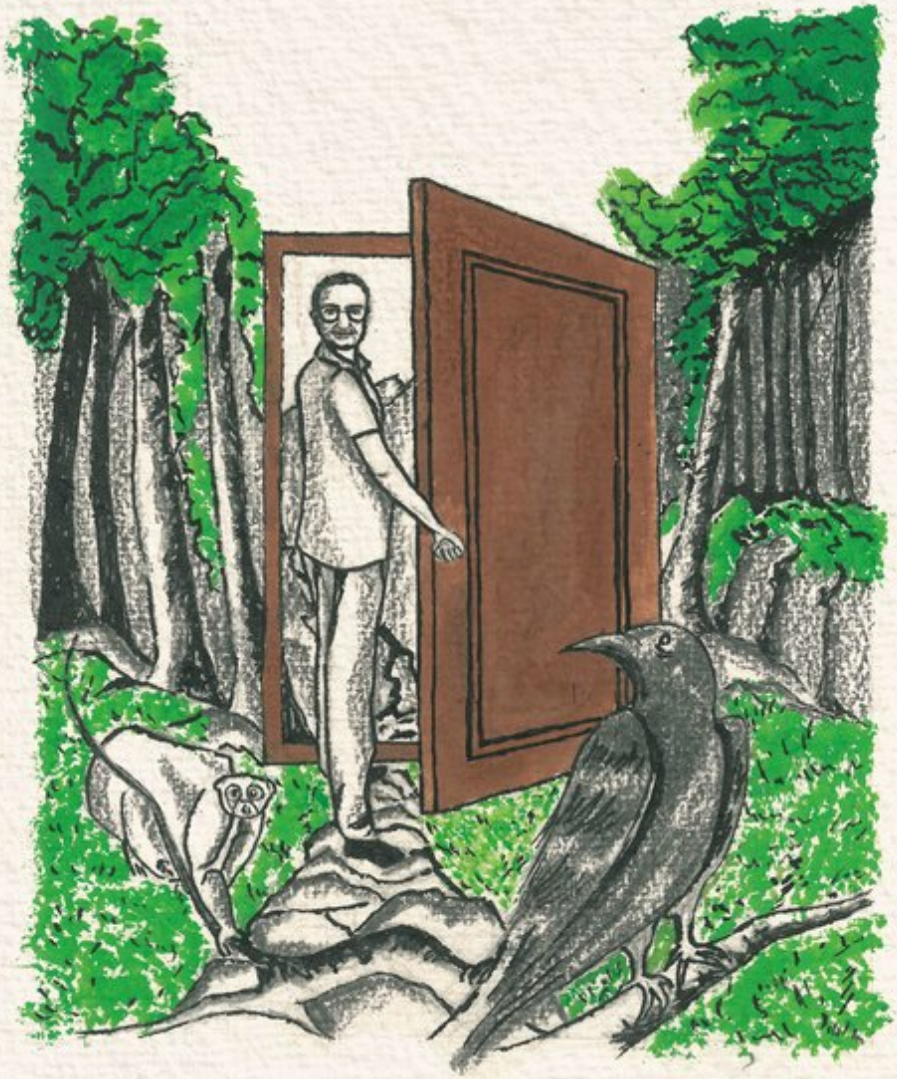
PRATHAM BOOKS

Level 4

The Secret World of Mehlli Gobhai: The Man Who Found Art Everywhere

Author: Jerry Pinto
Illustrator: Kripa B
Painter: Mehlli Gobhai



Art teaches you to see the world anew.
Jerry had heard that said often enough but he didn't really believe it.
One day in 2002, he and his friend, the artist Mehlli Gobhai, were walking in the hills around Gholvad. It was September and the rains had turned parts of the countryside green.

Mehlli Gobhai: *Untitled*, mixed media on canvas, 2006

“How lovely it all looks,” said Jerry.
“Too much green,” said Mehlli.
“I thought everyone likes green,” said Jerry.
“I do, too. But when the trees are bare, you can see their shapes. You see how it is all geometry. Life has geometry underlying it.”

They walked to an anicut and stood listening to the music of the water gurgling and singing beneath them.

“The water is brown,” said Jerry.
“That’s why I came back to India. I remember walking in a wood in the United States of America and coming to a stream that ran so clear that I could see the stones at the bottom. I prefer this kind of stream,” said Mehlli.

“Why?” asked Jerry.
Mehlli said: “This stream is rich with mud.
It is fertile. It will leave some mud on the banks and other things will grow. This stream carries life.”

In 2012, Jerry was walking in Gholvad again. It was May, and the area was dry. The ground was hard and waiting for the rains. He could see the shapes of the trees. And when he came to the anicut, he thought again of the rich mud of the stream. In some ways, talking to Mehlli had felt like being on the banks of a muddy stream.

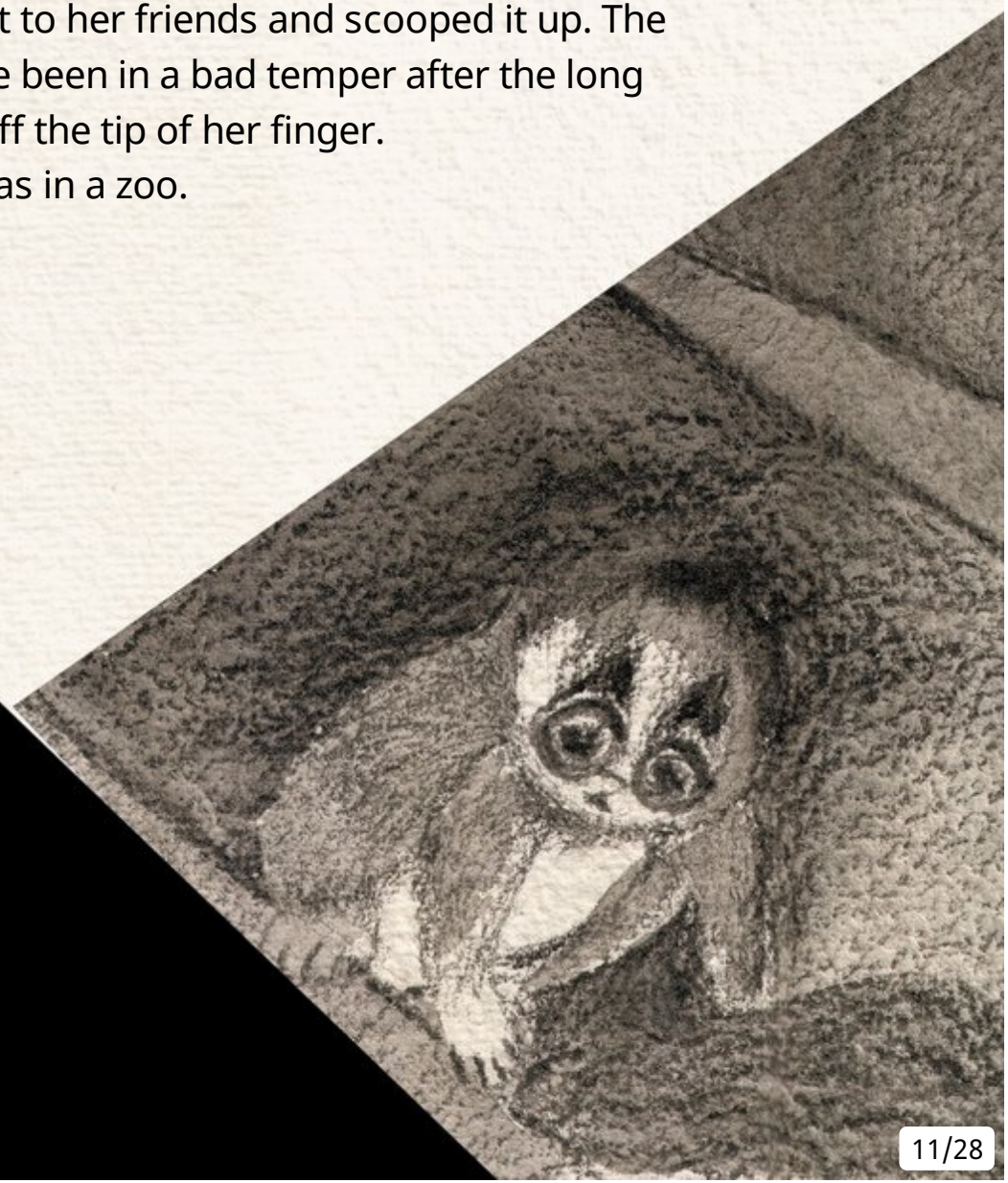
Mehlli Gobhai was born in 1932. Bombay was very different in those days. The world was very different, too. India was under British rule. Even television was in the future.

The Second World War broke out in 1939 and the Army requisitioned Gobhai House, Byculla, where the family was living.
The family moved to a bungalow by the sea in Andheri, one of the seven bungalows of Saat Bangla. Then the Navy requisitioned that house, too.

Perin Gobhai, Mehlli’s mother, decided that she had had enough of moving and being moved, and she bought the family a flat on Carmichael Road. This was wise because in the years to come Minocher Gobhai, Mehlli’s father, would suffer losses in business and Perin would keep things going by giving lessons in bridge and taking in boarders.

Mehlli had a slow loris as a pet. He would spend his time in the evenings catching cockroaches and offering them to the slow loris. It would extend a long arm slowly and take the live insect and crunch it up happily. No one knew about the slow loris, and since it was a very quiet creature—and lazy too—Mehlli managed to keep it hidden in his room.

Then one day, it found its way into the dining room. His mother insisted it go to a zoo and so Mehlli gave it to a French air hostess, who took it with her to Paris. She wanted to show it to her friends and scooped it up. The animal must have been in a bad temper after the long flight. It nipped off the tip of her finger.
The next day it was in a zoo.



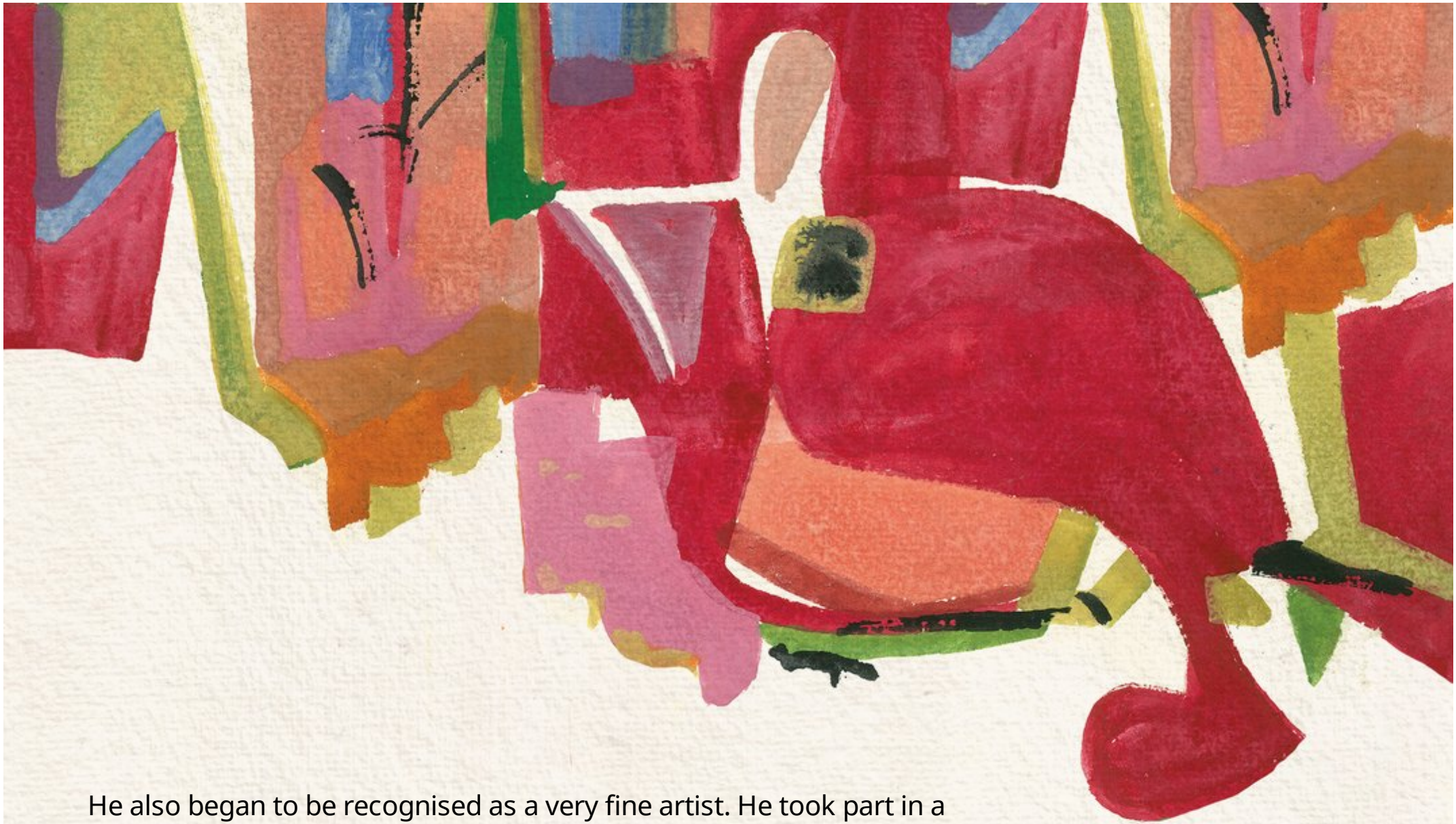
After Mehlli finished college, he joined J Walter Thomson where he worked on advertising campaigns. In those days, artists would do “roughs” (sketches) to show the client. The client would ask for changes and then they would be refined. Bobby Kooka of Air India took one look at Mehlli’s roughs and said they did not need any further work. They could be used as they were.

Later, Mehlli went to London to study art. He moved to New York and worked in advertising again, but what he really wanted to do was paint.
So he gave up his job and started taking lessons at the Art Students League. There he was taught by the legendary Robert Beverly Hale.
“He didn’t just teach us to draw an arm from the outside,” Mehlli would say. “He began with the bones and then he drew the muscles on to them, added the tendons, the fat and finally the skin. So we learned how an arm worked, not just how it looked,”

Perin was worried about her son.
Perin: Will he ever settle down?
Minocher: Why should he settle down? He should strive to move up instead.

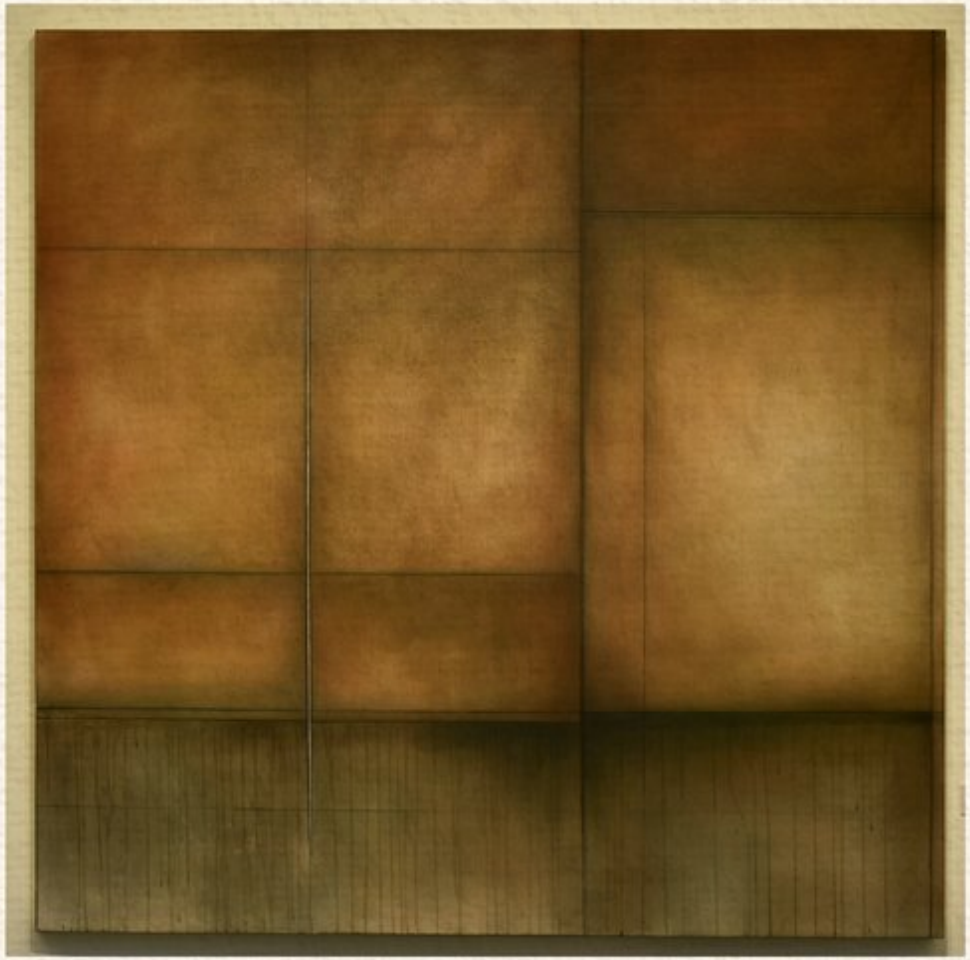
But Mehlli also had to pay the bills, so he began to do illustrations for children's books. There was *To Your Good Health: A Russian Fable*, and *A Hindu Boyhood* by Sharat Shetty.
He didn't like some of the things he was offered.
Eunice Holsaert, who was his agent, said,
"Why don't you write your own books?"
And he did. There was *Lakshmi the Water Buffalo Who Wouldn't* and *Ramu and the Kite*.

He was fascinated by folktales and classics of Greece and Persia. He loved the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva and Mughal miniatures and Rajput paintings. You can see how all these crept into his work.



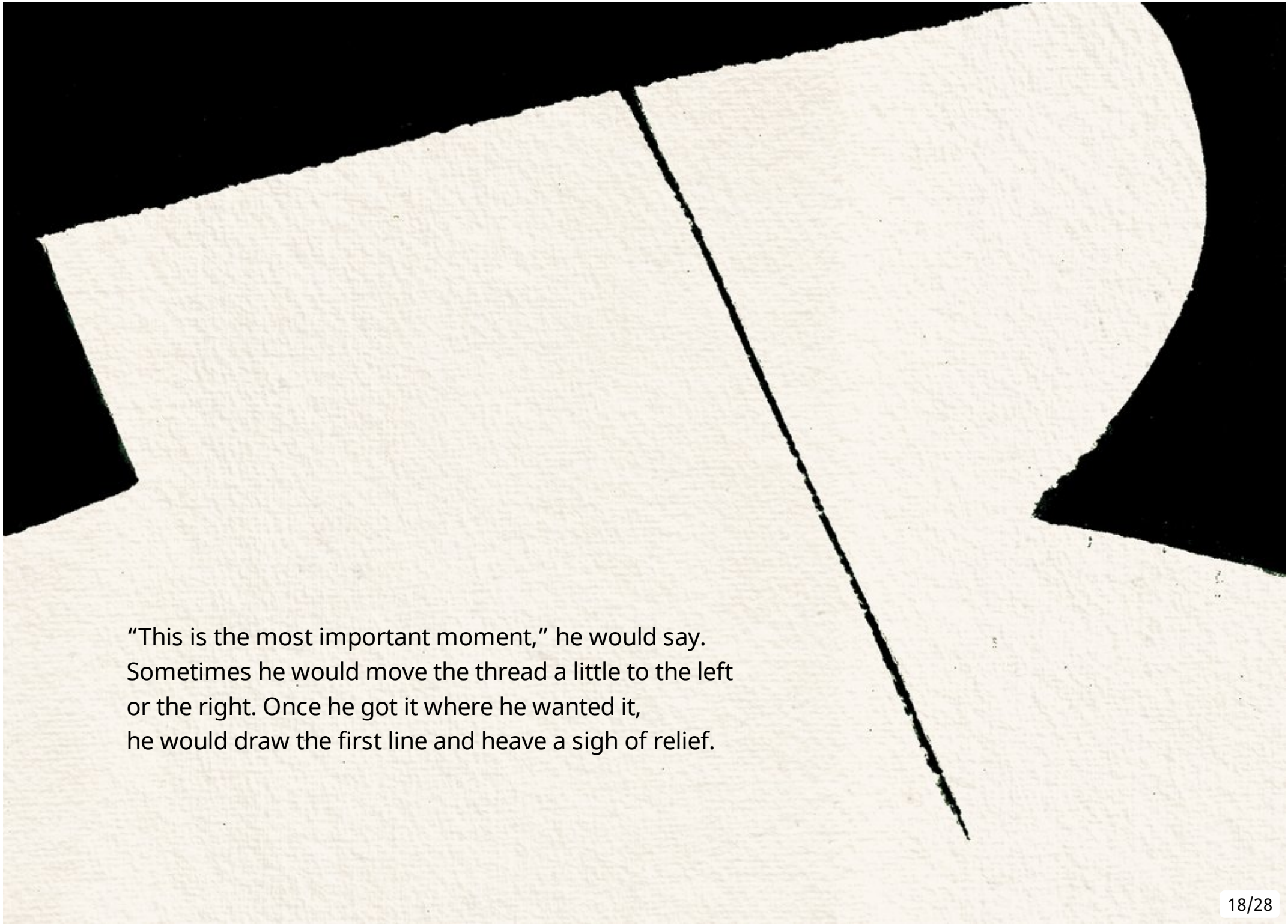
He also began to be recognised as a very fine artist. He took part in a show at the Bronx Museum. The New York Times wrote about him. He got his Green Card. That meant he could live in the USA but some part of him wanted to come home.

“I would visit India and look at how gracefully the Lamani women would walk home, balancing pots on their heads. I would look at the glorious colours of tribal art and how a vendor would arrange his combs in a beautiful pattern and I felt I had to come back,” Mehlli would say.



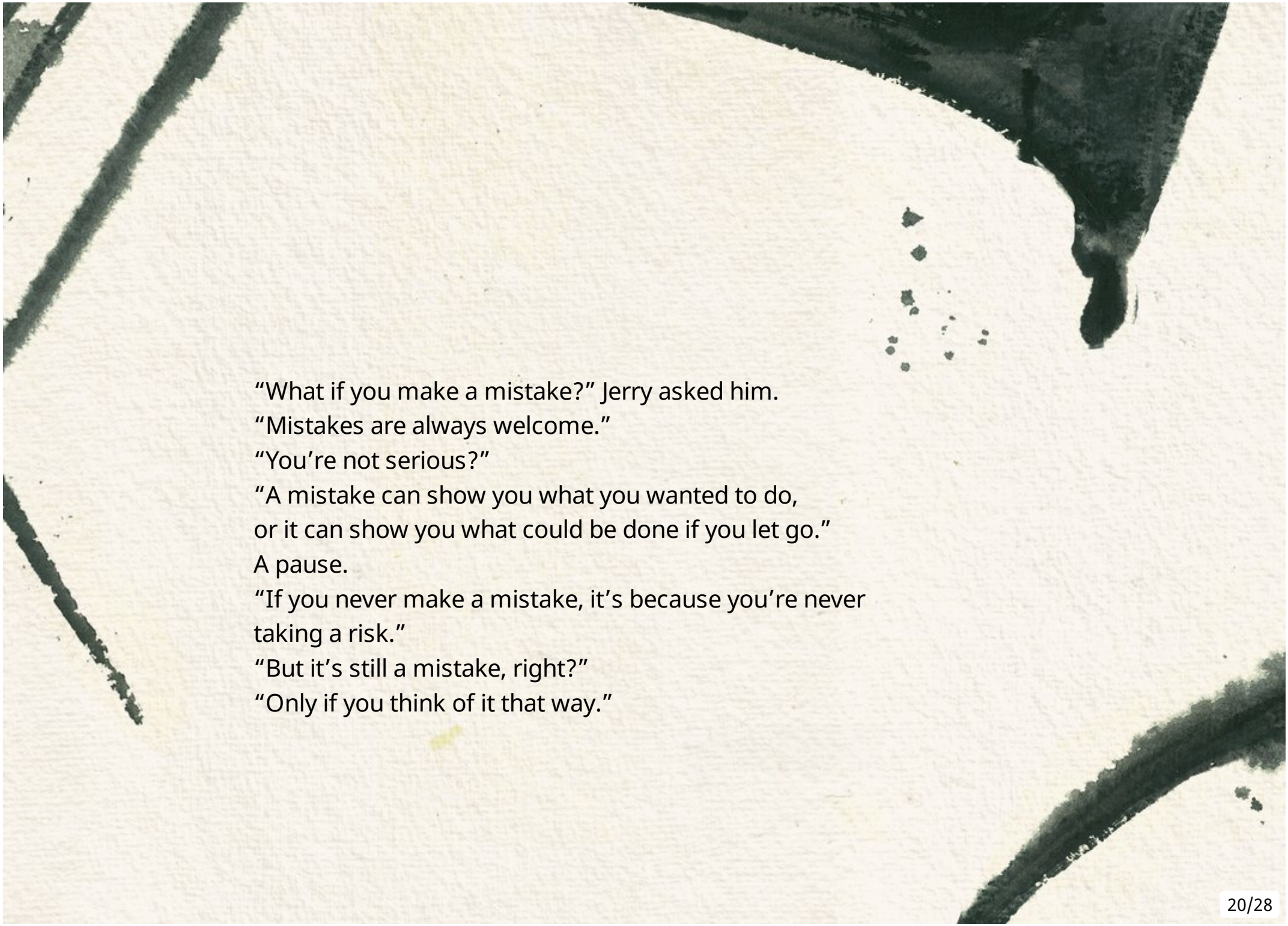
Mehlli Gobhai: *2 Untitled*, mixed media on canvas, 2007

The odd thing was that when Mehlli was in New York, he used great big swathes of colour, perhaps because he was missing India. But when he got home to India, his palette changed and became quieter. He was interested in the darkness of the garbhagriha in a small temple. He wanted to capture the essence of things. He wanted to cut away anything that wasn't necessary. So he would put up a canvas or a piece of handmade paper. He would take a black thread from his mother's sewing box and divide up the space. Then he would sit and look at it for hours.



“This is the most important moment,” he would say.
Sometimes he would move the thread a little to the left
or the right. Once he got it where he wanted it,
he would draw the first line and heave a sigh of relief.

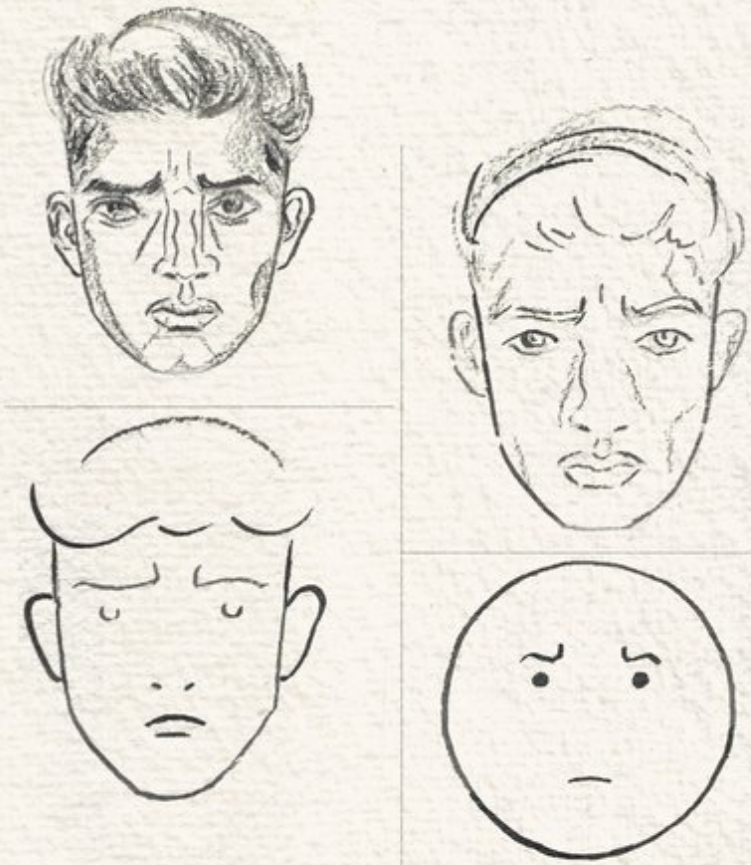
After that he would begin to work. He used brushes, knives, cloth and dusters, sprays, anything that he thought he needed.



“What if you make a mistake?” Jerry asked him.
“Mistakes are always welcome.”
“You’re not serious?”
“A mistake can show you what you wanted to do,
or it can show you what could be done if you let go.”
A pause.
“If you never make a mistake, it’s because you’re never taking a risk.”
“But it’s still a mistake, right?”
“Only if you think of it that way.”

A crow emerged from under an armchair and began to totter about quietly.
“Who’s that?”
“Kauwwa.”
“I can see that much, but why is he here?”
“I found him under a truck. He can’t fly.”
“What if he dirties your painting?”
“Who knows, he might even improve it.”

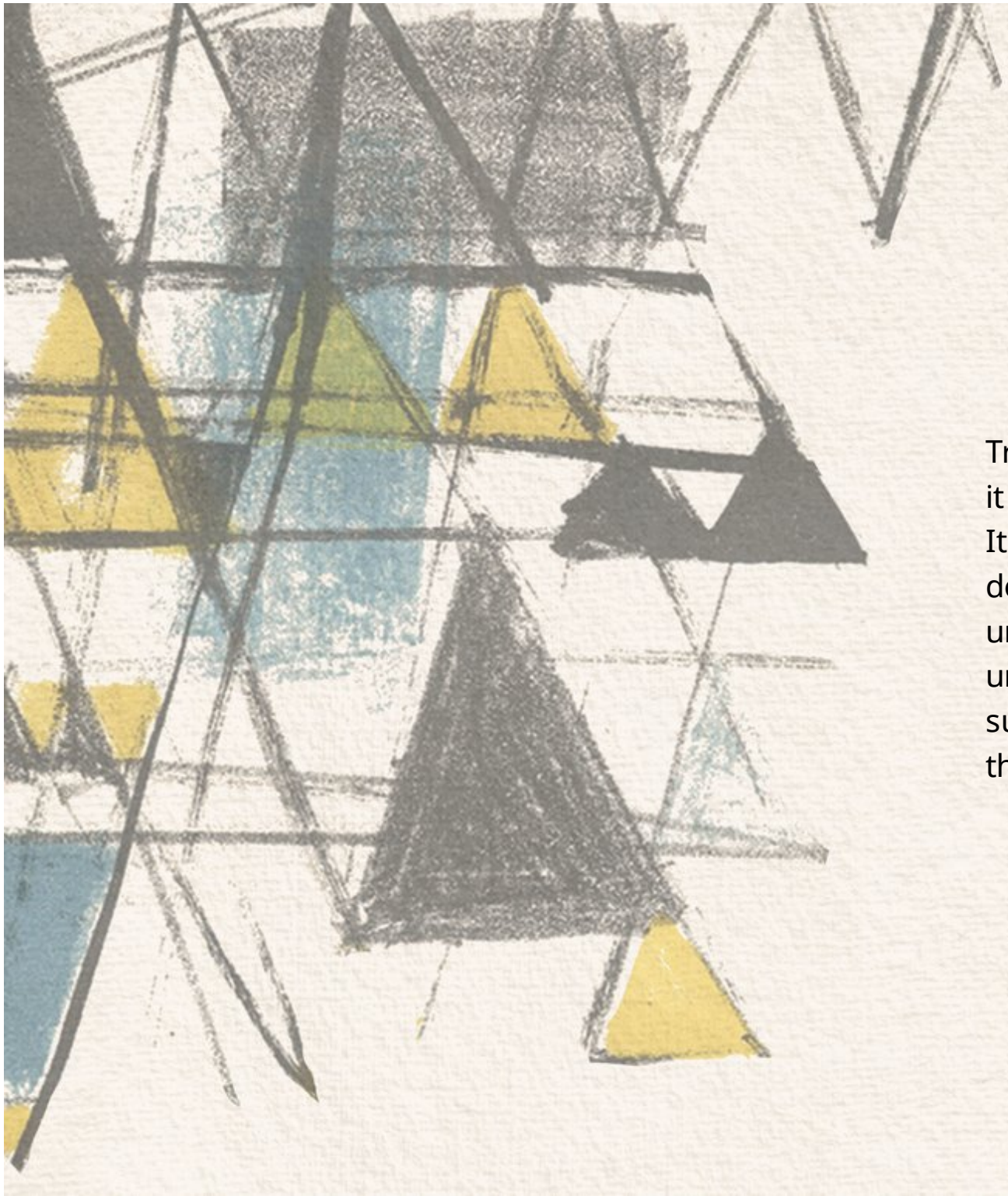
Here’s an experiment.
Look at the drawings below.
You can see a face.



You can take away many of the details but it will still be a face.
That’s what abstraction does. It takes away unnecessary details.
Finally, you get this.
The emoji? That’s an abstraction.
But what if you don’t want to paint a face?
What if you want to paint a thought?
What if you want to paint a feeling?
How would you paint that?

When Mehlli had finished a painting, he would not title it.
“Why not?” Jerry asked.
“Because the viewer should name the painting. I don’t want to explain what I’ve painted. I want my viewer to say, ‘This is what I see.’ ”
Different people see different things.
“An old piece of leather.”
“Something on the point of bursting into flames.”
“A great darkness. A silence.”
“Something that came into being on its own. An outcropping of rock. A crystal.”

Mehlli Gobhai: *Untitled*,mixed media on paper, 2006



Try that. Look at a painting and name it yourself.
It doesn’t matter if you joke. It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand. You’re not supposed to understand art or explain it. It’s supposed to make you feel, make you think. Give the painting a name.

Mehlli Gobhai: *Untitled*, lithograph, year unknown

Here is one of Mehlli’s works. Can you see the Nandi Bull, the mount of Lord Shiva? Look for the horns and the hump. See how the image suddenly jumps out at you?
With modern art, you go on a journey. You have to look and look again. You have to untrain your eyes and set your mind free. You have to try and follow the painter’s thought.

When he was in his seventies, Mehlli had a stroke.
When he could not paint, he lost interest in life. He withdrew into his mind which was still full of images: the leopard cub at the court of the Rani of Kota, chasing the palace maids who would run away giggling; the snake that came to drink at his water hole where he would fill his pot when he visited Himachal Pradesh; the house Charles Correa designed for him in a chikoo orchard in Gholvad; his beautiful Saluki Salim, running alongside his bicycle in Central Park; his friend Andrew Kelly reading a book; walking in the hills and a cloud descending so that all the birds went quiet and all the trees began to fade...

Mehlli Gobhai (1932–2018)

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'The Secret World of Mehlli Gobhai: The Man Who Found Art Everywhere' has been published on StoryWeaver by Pratham Books. www.prathambooks.org Much of the reference material for the illustrations in this book, including Mehlli's body of work, came from the retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, held in early 2020.

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The Secret World of Mehlli Gobhai: The Man Who Found Art Everywhere

(English)

The murky waters of a winding stream, stark trees stripped of leaves, a crow messing up a canvas—Mehlli Gobhai saw art in all of this. Follow the journey of this inspiring painter and see how art is all around and can help you see the world anew.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.

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